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SUBJECT: THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT: AFGHAN VS AMERICAN BELIEFS

REF: KABUL 1544

Classified By: RONALD E. NEUMANN FOR REASONS 1.4(A) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary: Afghanistan is in flux, fully exposed to a barrage of new concepts, economic and social change after decades of war, with a populace that both welcomes many changes and yet can react negatively and forcefully when new ideas and events seem to threaten the fragile social structure and traditions of what is still in most ways a closed society. Any incident (such as the Rahman apostasy case) which puts general western concepts of law and tradition into conflict with traditional Afghan custom should be viewed within this context. What the West sees as a much-needed campaign at national reform on many fronts can be viewed very differently by Afghan stake-holders, and can generate social and political repercussions. The presence of a large military peacekeeping force, the Western-instigated campaign to eradicate the poppy crop that provides or supplements income for thousands of families, the tension engendered by a Western-driven military and security campaign to root out the remnants of the Taliban regime, the barrage of criticism that hits Afghans -- much of it originating in the Western press -- about Afghan corruption, inefficiency and poor governance, and a consistent effort by Western advisors to change the traditional Afghan legal and local government system are often necessary components of building a democratic, accountable state. But they all exacerbate the possibilities of tension. Pushed recklessly, they would impact negatively on the long-term U.S. mission of creating a stable Afghanistan that will never shelter another September 11 attack. Success will come with getting the balance right between necessary principles and unnecessary speed. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Islam - and specifically the Afghan concept of Islam - is the basis of behavior in Afghanistan, a unifying factor that is inseparable from the Afghans' sense of personal identity, their conception of their own place in society and their understanding of what Afghanistan is. It is common wisdom that Afghan law is based on the Koran and Sharia, but less-well understood is what this means in daily life to the Afghans. It permeates the social structure and is the basis of social behavior in every way, bringing political leaders to their knees in daily public prayer,

regulating the way men and women relate socially, defining dress standards, and affecting what can be printed or viewed in the media more than in some other Muslim societies. The Constitution attempts to bridge the traditional Afghan conservative religious view of law with ideas and beliefs that are part of a more international norm, but success has been limited.

¶3. (SBU) While other religions are given a nod of recognition in Article Two of the Constitution ("followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals"), the same article strongly affirms the central tenet that "the sacred religion of Islam is the religion of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan". The Constitution codifies the role of Islam in very basic terms. Article Three states that "In Afghanistan, no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam". Article Sixty Two states that presidential candidates should be Muslim, and in the presidential oath of office specified in Article Sixty Three, the President-elect must swear "to obey and protect the holy religion of Islam". Cabinet Ministers swear a similar oath, and members of the Supreme Court "swear in the name of God Almighty to support justice and righteousness in accord with the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam" as well. Article One Hundred Forty Nine notes that "the principles of adherence to the tenets of the holy religion of Islam as well as Islamic republicanism shall not be amended".

¶4. (SBU) The explicit references to Islam in the Constitution are not mere words. During the Constitutional Loya Jirga (2003-2004) where the statutes of the constitution were discussed and hammered out, this emphasis on adherence

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to Islam was deeply felt and insisted on by Afghan delegates from every political and ethnic background, who saw it as a basic part of their personal and national identity. References to the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international treaties and international conventions were included as a nod to the UN and other advisors in order to make the Constitution more palatable to the Western tastes, but few of the delegates had any real knowledge of what was contained in these documents.

¶5. (C) Recent incidents in Afghanistan reacting to the alleged desecration of the Koran by American prison guards in Guantanamo, cartoons ridiculing the Prophet Mohammad printed in Denmark, articles supporting the right to conversion written by dissident Shi'ite Afghan cleric Mohaqqueq Nasab, and most recently the case of Abdul Rahman, a convert to Christianity from Islam, are well-publicized events that reverberated through Afghan society at all levels. They demonstrated the power of conservative Afghan religious groups to draw attention or incite demonstrations (there have been surprisingly few so far, though things may be brewing) when they perceive that Islam has been threatened. They also serve as a very convenient pretext for people - whether Afghan or foreign - whose political agenda involves weakening the central government or causing embarrassment for western security forces and advisors in the country. Many Afghans point to hostile foreign hands - usually defined as Iran or Pakistan - who use such incidents to further their own policies of disruption, but it is just as possible that drug lords who are trying to preserve the narcotics-based economy that enriches them, smugglers who benefit from insecure borders, families involved in long-term feuds, and a wide variety of domestic political opposition figures and groups might be involved. Any incident that seems to weaken the central government's authority or weaken the reputation of western security forces can serve the purposes of this wide spectrum of special political and economic interest groups.

¶6. (C) The core problem for the USG efforts in Afghanistan is that such incidents are almost impossible to predict or forestall. Much of the populace is attached to the religion

of Islam in a personal and very profound way. Levels of sophistication and religious training vary widely, but the economic, social, and political reality in Afghanistan means that many people are easily swayed by emotional charges that westerners are trying to insult or destroy the country's religious and social traditions.

¶7. (C) The conversion case of Abdul Rahman was a flash point in Afghanistan. The Afghan reaction to the west's criticism has been generally consistent through all contacts with Afghan officials and private citizens. Ex-jihadis, government officials, and Members of Parliament of all stripes have warned Poloff that this situation, and similar cases that may arise, are explosive and might irreparably damage the Afghan-American relationship. While some expressed their concern in political terms and claimed that the U.S. forced President Karzai into a dangerous corner, others couched their comments in a religious manner. It made no difference whether the Afghan was U.S.-educated and liberal in world-outlook, or totally unfamiliar with the west. The latest in these discussions was a friendly but very pointed warning to Poloff from a well-placed Member of Parliament (who is very favorably inclined towards the U.S.) that it might be impossible to control the popular backlash if another such incident occurred, and that the consequences would cause a serious breach between the Afghan people and the U.S. He added that this was not his opinion alone, but that he had been asked to present it by other MPs to Poloff.

¶8. (SBU) This does not mean that Afghans want to see a break in relations. Far from it. They fully support American assistance in reconstructing the country and emphasize their gratitude and their need for foreign help continuously. But there is a line between their heartfelt request for assistance and what many view as unwelcome interference in religious practice. The Abdul Rahman case served to highlight their fear that Afghan traditions and

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faith are in jeopardy.

¶9. (C) The bottom line: Many Afghans see the western criticism about Abdul Rahman as an attack on Islam, on the ability of Afghanistan to govern itself, and on the Afghan sense of identification as Moslem and Afghan. Those who are politically sophisticated understand that the issue is an important one to the USG and to Americans who support Afghanistan, but domestic emotions in Afghanistan itself may outweigh this understanding. Afghan friends of the U.S. hope that official USG reaction to the Rahman case - and others that may follow - will take this into consideration, because they fear the domestic, political and popular consequences in Afghanistan of any repetition of U.S. criticism.
Neumann